
Patton Museum Turns Fifty

As World War II ended, the United States Army began the occupation of Germany. The surrender of the German armies had left war equipment all across Germany, and in the U.S. sector, roughly Bavaria, the Army began to collect weapons and armed vehicles to feed American steel mills after the war. But looking over the last battlefield, General George S. Patton, Jr. saw not just enemy equipment, but an opportunity to study the German equipment and learn from it. At his inspiration, selected equipment was reserved for shipment to Fort Knox. One of Patton's last diary entries recorded a visit to the Skoda factory, a major arms producer in Czechoslovakia, where Patton noted that U.S. designers needed to look at a suspension system developed there.

General Patton died before the equipment could be shipped to Fort Knox, but in 1946 and in the years that followed, Fort Knox became a collection point for many of these samples of German engineering. The equipment was stored in a large frame building that had once been used as a sub-caliber range, where soldiers fired .22-caliber rounds through 37mm tank guns at tin tank targets mounted on moving tracks.

While the Armor Center and School tried to figure how to exploit this material, veterans began to ask to see the equipment of their war. In 1947, the "Patton Collection" was opened to the public. Veterans would bring their families to see the captured equipment and the walls resounded with tales, both humorous and frightening, of the exploits of American units in World War II.

By 1949, the annual attendance had grown to 82,000. The Armor Center decided to form a museum around the collection. Monument tanks from the First World War were recovered from around post and added to the collection. On May 30, 1949, the museum was dedicated to General Patton.

As American armor was added to the collection, the focus of exhibits shifted toward the story of U.S. armor, with less emphasis on German armor. In 1963, an Armor School staff study attempted to define just what the Museum should be, and recommended the following major changes:

- The Museum would become the "official museum of Cavalry and Armor."
- The Museum and its collection would be incorporated into programs of instruction for officer and enlisted students of the U.S. Army Armor School.



- It would establish and operate a research library containing papers, articles, photographs and other material related to Cavalry and Armor.

To this day, these three goals form the core mission of the Patton Museum. The study also recommended the construction of a new facility and the creation of a private organization to raise funds for the new facility. In 1965, the Cavalry Armor Foundation was formed to build a new museum building. Funds were collected from the Armor community and initially rose to a sizable sum, yet it was far short of the funds necessary to build the Museum.

Officers returned from Vietnam and asked, "What happened to the money?" when MG William R. Desobry assumed command of the Armor Center and School. General Desobry challenged the Foundation to build what they could afford and renew their credibility with the Armor community. In 1972, General Desobry presided over the opening of the Patton Museum in a new building, the first phase of the current structure off U.S. 31W near the Chaffee Avenue main gate.

General Desobry's concept of building in phases became the pattern for the future. In 1975, just three years after the opening of the small building, the Foundation doubled the space, which now equaled the space available at the old sub-caliber range that had been the museum's previous home. Additional construction in 1982 and 1984 completed the original Foundation plan.

While the Foundation worked on a new museum building, the collection doubled and doubled again. Attendance increased, and visitors demanded more services. In 1983, as the Foundation closed in on its final goal to complete the building, the Armor Center asked the Foundation to add an auditorium. This was completed and dedicated to General Creighton W. Abrams in 1992.